

Remarks by President Charles Michel after his meeting with Prime Minister of Albania Edi Rama

First of all, I would like once again to extend my deepest condolences, personally and on the part of the European Union, with regard to the tragedy that struck your country in November, and to express our solidarity with the victims and their families. Their lives have been devastated. And I would also like to reaffirm the European Union's commitment, following the decision taken by the European Council in December with all the heads of state assembled in Brussels, to encourage the European Commission to organise the donors' conference which will take place in Brussels in a few weeks to ensure that, alongside the words of compassion, alongside the words of empathy and support, action is taken to provide real support to the people of your country.

Prime Minister, dear Edi, we have had yet another opportunity for a dialogue, one which has been intensive and useful, which is necessary, and which, as always, has been a pleasure for me. We often met when I was Prime Minister of Belgium. And today, as President of the European Council, it has been an opportunity to speak about the relationship between this country and, more generally, between the Western Balkans and the European Union. This will be a topic of discussion for the European Council in the next few weeks, and it is my responsibility to lead the talks. This is an opportunity not only to discuss but also, I hope, to take decisions on and set the markers for the future relationship between Albania and the European Union, between the Western Balkans and the European Union. As I see it, the strategy that we must attempt to develop together is made up of three pillars.

The first pillar is the need – and I would like to be able to explain this here, in your country – the need for European countries, for heads of state and government, to agree on how to approach the enlargement process in the years to come. How do European countries want to reform and modernise the enlargement process in order to make that process credible, to instil it with more trust, more political leadership? That is the discussion that European countries need to have. As you know, very soon the European Commission, having consulted the member states, will present proposals to the European Council with regard to modernising the principle and the process of enlargement.

The second pillar: as you know, just before summer last year, the European Commission presented proposals to the European Council on opening negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. The European Council will discuss this topic once again on the basis of the European Commission's new proposal. And I consider it important that we at the European Council try to obtain clarity on the direction we would like to take for the future. We need unanimity among the member states, and that calls for an intensive, serious and solid dialogue between them. And it is my responsibility, as President of

the European Council, to encourage a convergence of points of view, to enable the European Council to take decisions on this subject.

And then there is a third point which, in my view, is of central importance, because it makes it possible for us, I believe, to take some vital steps forward in connection with the first two subjects to which I have just referred. The third point is the call I wish to make, around the European Council table, for a real investment and growth pact for the Western Balkans. An investment and growth pact which will enable the various instruments at the EU's disposal to be brought into play – all possible instruments, including those for encouraging economic development, which is a key condition for improving social conditions and encouraging all forms of transnational cooperation. This is a regional approach which should contribute to the three pillars which I have just mentioned.

The destiny of this country, the destiny of the Western Balkans, must be oriented entirely towards Europe. That is a very strong conviction. And it is necessary for us to continue this narrowly-focused and regulated dialogue. This also calls for the commitment, which you have reaffirmed, to continue all efforts in terms of reform, of modernisation, of engagement in favour of the rule of law and combating organised crime. All these subjects are essential for us to continue to work together, to reaffirm, once again today, the destiny of this region which is turned towards Europe and which in the weeks and months ahead will lead us to work closely together, with this aim and this ambition.

I shall conclude by saying that we need to continue the dialogue. We need to keep up our work so that we can continue to strengthen trust and credibility, affirm political leadership, and achieve tangible results, first of all for the citizens of the countries concerned, but also so that we can take steps forward. And as I announced to you, I shall have the pleasure, on the eve of the donors' conference for your country in Brussels, of holding a meeting with all the Western Balkans leaders. It will also be an opportunity, I hope, to show and express the political impetus which we want to give. A new institutional cycle within the EU has just begun: the President of the European Commission and myself took up our posts at the beginning of December. And I wanted, very soon after taking office, by my presence here with you, to affirm very strongly and unambiguously the ambition we have to make progress towards this goal which we share. Thank you.